

Finally, during the reporting period, the Ombudsman noted that the CAO was referring case problems to the service centers and field offices using SRMT to obtain more detailed responses to difficult case problems.<sup>123</sup> CAO informed customers that answers should be forthcoming from local offices within thirty days. The CAO's utilization of SRMT actually shifts public case problems to field offices despite the fact that the CAO and call centers were established to relieve field offices from having to respond to numerous questions from the public. Consequently, the current approach seemingly has created a redundant bureaucratic process that merely delays resolution of customer inquiries.

The Ombudsman has requested attention to this situation on numerous occasions during this and previous reporting periods, but USCIS has not been as responsive as expected. The Ombudsman and USCIS have enrolled in the Department's correspondence tracking system program administered by the DHS Executive Secretary to create an organized system for referring and responding to correspondence received by DHS component offices. With this effort, the Ombudsman has started to work with the USCIS Executive Secretary who is now responsible for CAO oversight. As of this writing, the Ombudsman and the USCIS Executive Secretary have begun to develop better means of communication between the Ombudsman and CAO that include: (1) the establishment of a CAO liaison responsible for Ombudsman case problems referred to USCIS; (2) modification of workflow activities to generate aging reports to ensure timely responses by the CAO; and (3) completion of deployment of USCIS computer systems so Ombudsman personnel may fully analyze case problems and recommend action when referring case problems to the CAO.

## VIII. 2006-07 REPORTING YEAR OBJECTIVES

Since 2003, the Ombudsman has identified the major systemic issues affecting individuals and employers seeking USCIS services such as: USCIS funding; prolonged processing times and the related issuance of interim benefits; lack of standardization in USCIS decisions; deficient customer service; and lack of IT modernization. In the coming year, the Ombudsman will continue to focus on these and other technical areas that may require procedural, regulatory, and possible legislative changes to improve the quality of service for customers, enhance national security, and increase USCIS efficiency.

The Ombudsman also will continue to focus on the expansion of up-front processing programs, such as DORA in the Dallas District Office, which dramatically improve customer experiences, while increasing security and reducing costs. The Ombudsman looks forward to working with USCIS in the coming year on the expansion of such programs.

Another 2006-07 reporting year objective is to analyze the critical role of contractors in application processing and record handling, and the many problems that stem from processes now handled primarily by contractors. Contractor arrangements currently account for over 50 percent of the USCIS budget and are an important part of the overall USCIS effort to improve customer service, national security, and efficiency.

<sup>123</sup> See *supra* section II.I.

In addition, the Ombudsman will continue to expand public outreach and explore development of a “Virtual Ombudsman” system available online to enhance the public’s ability to communicate directly with the office.

Finally, the next reporting year will include a continuation of regular trips to USCIS facilities, including return visits to determine if proposed changes were implemented and a continuation of meetings with individuals, employers, community based organizations, and employer organizations. The Ombudsman will focus on new, innovative business processes to streamline adjudications and the use of emerging technologies to improve customer service, USCIS efficiency, and national security.